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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 10003

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SUBJECT: CASTRO GREETES FORMER COUP LEADER CHAVEZ

¶1. (U) CARACAS NEWSPAPERS GAVE FRONT PAGE COVERAGE DECEMBER 15 TO THE VISIT TO HAVANA OF RETIRED ARMY LT. COL. HUGO CHAVEZ. FEATURING PHOTOS OF FIDEL CASTRO EMBRACING CHAVEZ, THE PRESS REPORTED THAT THE CUBAN PRESIDENT WENT TO THE AIRPORT TO GREET THE PRINCIPAL LEADER OF THE FAILED FEBRUARY 1992 COUP AGAINST THEN PRESIDENT CARLOS ANDRES PEREZ. CHAVEZ WAS REPORTEDLY INVITED TO CUBA TO LECTURE ON SIMON BOLIVAR. THE PRESS NOTED THAT CASTRO WAS IRONICALLY ONE OF THE FIRST FOREIGN LEADERS TO SEND A TELEGRAM IN SUPPORT OF FORMER PRESIDENT PEREZ AFTER THE FEBRUARY 1992 COUP ATTEMPT, AND NOW THE CUBAN CHIEF IS TREATING THE MAN WHO ORCHESTRATED THE COUP MUCH LIKE A VISITING HEAD OF STATE.

¶2. (U) PROFESSING HIS ADMIRATION FOR CUBA ("THE AUTHENTIC BOLIVARIAN DREAM BREATHES HERE"), CHAVEZ AFFIRMED THAT VENEZUELA REQUIRED A ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND MORAL REVOLUTION. HE CALLED THE GOV A "CIVILIAN DICTATORSHIP DISGUISED AS A DEMOCRACY". THE LEADER OF THE "BOLIVARIAN REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT 200" (MBR-200) ALSO ASSERTED THAT HIS GROUP WOULD SEEK POWER IN VENEZUELA DEMOCRATICALLY. AT THE SAME TIME, CHAVEZ REITERATED THAT HE WOULD NOT PARTICIPATE IN FUTURE ELECTIONS UNLESS THE "RULES OF THE GAME ARE CHANGED."

¶3. (LOU) ON THE AFTERNOON OF DECEMBER 15, FOREIGN MINISTER MIGUEL ANGEL BURELLI RIVAS REPORTEDLY CALLED IN GERMAN GARCIA OTERO, THE CUBAN AMBASSADOR IN CARACAS, TO "LAY OUT THE VENEZUELAN POSITION" TOWARDS CHAVEZ' WARM RECEPTION. THE LACK OF PUBLIC COMMENTS REGARDING WHAT WAS SAID DURING MEETING LEFT LITTLE DOUBT THE EXCHANGE WAS COLD. TWO DAYS LATER BURELLI RIVAS FELT COMPELLED TO COMMENT THAT HIS EXCHANGE WITH GARCIA OTERO DEALT ONLY WITH BILATERAL ISSUES. THE MINISTER ALSO ASSERTED THAT THE RETURN TO CARACAS OF THE VENEZUELAN AMBASSADOR IN HAVANA HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THE CHAVEZ INCIDENT. IN OTHER REACTION, THE ARCHBISHOP OF BARQUISIMETO COMMENTED ON THE CHAVEZ VISIT IN HIS TELEVISED CHRISTMAS MESSAGE, BLASTING CHAVEZ FOR COMPARING CASTRO'S CUBAN DICTATORSHIP TO THE BOLIVARIAN DREAM.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: IT IS NOT IMMEDIATELY EVIDENT WHAT DOMESTIC POLITICAL BENEFIT CHAVEZ EXPECTS TO DERIVE FROM HIS VISIT TO CUBA AND MEETING WITH CASTRO. IF ANYTHING, IN THE EYES OF MOST VENEZUELAN THE ENCOUNTER WILL MORE CLEARLY PLACE THE NATIONALISTIC, POLITICALLY AMBIGUOUS CHAVEZ AND HIS MBR IN THE POLITICAL CAMP OF THE FAR LEFT. THE CUBAN MODEL IS NOT ONE THAT HAS MANY SUPPORTERS HERE, SO HIS FLIRTING WITH CASTRO WOULD NOT SEEM A MOVE THAT WOULD WIN HIM VAST SUPPORT AT HOME. ON THE CONTRARY, A PERCEPTION THAT HE IS CLOSE TO CASTRO COULD COST CHAVEZ POLITICALLY SINCE A CONSIDERABLE PORTION OF HIS SUPPORT DERIVES FROM THE VIEW THAT HE IS AN ANTI-SYSTEM POPULIST, NOT THAT HE IS A LEFTIST. WE PRESUME THAT FROM THE CUBAN PERSPECTIVE THE HIGH LEVEL ATTENTION PAID TO CHAVEZ WAS CASTRO'S WAY OF SIGNALING HIS DISPLEASURE WITH THE GOV OVER VENEZUELA'S COMMENTS ON THE NEED TO DEMOCRATIZE CUBA. BURELLI RIVAS' CALLING IN THE CUBAN AMBASSADOR PROVIDED THE GOV RESPONSE.

DAVIDOW